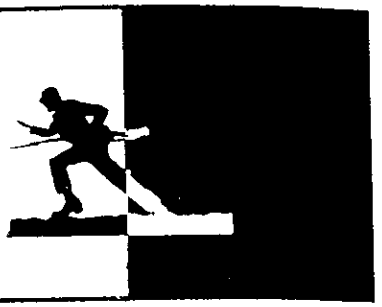
PAST TIMES



EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is another in our recurring series of articles reprinted from previous issues of INFANTRY and its predecessors, the INFANTRY SCHOOL QUARTERLY and the MAILING LIST.

Slightly edited for use here, this article originally appeared in INFANTRY, March-April 1969, pages 24-26. At the time he wrote the article, the author had just completed a tour of duty as a battalion commander in Vietnam. He retired from the Army in 1971 with the rank of colonel. He is the author of the recently published book About Face.

Dig Deep

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DAVID H. HACKWORTH

During an operation in the central highlands, a rifle platoon discovered a large enemy basecamp. The platoon leader, an old hand in the jungle, quickly established a perimeter and had the platoon scratch out hasty fighting positions. Simultaneously, two small patrols were dispatched. Mission: "Determine if the camp is occupied and by what size force." The patrols were told to avoid a fight.

Before the patrols got near the basecamp complex, they drew rifle fire and hotfooted it back to the platoon. In hot pursuit was an enemy force estimated at platoon strength. This force stumbled into the coiled platoon and bounced off violently with a bloody nose.

Soon the attack against the dug-in platoon was going full steam. Within a half hour of the initial abortive probe, the platoon was struck by a two-company size force. But the platoon leader had done his homework. In his initial estimate, he concluded that he could be up against at least a battalion. So when he decided to form a perimeter, he also laid on a first-class fire support plan.

As soon as the patrols had closed, the fire plan became a reality. The platoon leader placed a virtual wall of artillery steel around his perimeter. This fire was put in so close that secondary shrapnel cut throughout the perimeter. Tactical air was placed out beyond the artillery's protective ring. The lieutenant had the airborne FAC (forward air controller) put the fighter aircrafts' destructive fires within the enemy basecamp, on likely routes of movement, and on possible assembly areas. In short, the battlefield was made as hot as possible.

The platoon withstood strong enemy attacks for the next hour. The protective fires continued to hammer the enemy, disrupting his ability to penetrate the defending platoon's position. As small arms ammunition was becoming critically short, five friendly platoons who were checkerboarding within reinforcing distance had moved close enough to influence the action.

The enemy, upon discovering U.S. forces to their rear, concluded it was time to "give up the fight." Certainly, the deadly supporting fires also hastened this decision. The enemy broke off and disappeared into the bush, leaving a large number of their fellow soldiers lying on the battlefield.

This story unfolds like a classical infantry school defensive problem. Unfortunately, there are more examples in the record of where everything went wrong, rather than right. If the platoon leader follows the basic principles of defense, he will not get hurt. But for those who like to do things the easy way, the Vietnam jungle holds many tragic surprises.

A rifle platoon does not have the staying power to fight long as an independent force. Experience underscores the fact that a full-strength platoon can survive for not more than two hours against a strong, determined enemy force. And this is a platoon, as in our example, which has done everything by the book. After two hours, casualties, shortage of ammunition, and breakdown in command and control splinter a unit. It is no longer an organized fighting force and is subject to destruction in detail.

A rifle company should assemble its platoons and start preparing a solid company defensive perimeter not later than two hours before darkness. Ambush patrols should be planned early, and elements assigned ambush missions dropped off as *stay-behinds* during the platoon's movement to the proposed company defensive position. The ambushes should be sited on logical avenues of approach into the company defensive position.

Decent defensive terrain is hard to find in the bush. Do not worry about securing critical terrain. Worry only about making your defensive position fit you. Three-man holes should be the rule and the perimeter should be drawn tight. Each fighting position must be within sight of its adjacent neighbors during periods of limited visibility.

Listening posts should be set out in front of the platoon while the perimeter is being dug. Holes should at least come to the soldier's waist, and preferably to his chest. A grenade sump must be cut. Firing stakes made from jungle branches should mark the sector of fire. Soldiers should sleep below ground, directly behind their fighting holes.

Weapons should be cleaned and oiled before dark. Magazines and hand grenades should be arranged where they are ready for quick use. Soldiers should practice locating them in the dark. Also, they should practice changing M16 magazines and reloading the M60 machinegun during hours of darkness.

Soldiers should be made to rehearse moving from their sleeping positions to their fighting holes. They should not take off their clothes or boots at night during an operation.

Putting a poncho over a hole to keep out the rain tells the enemy exactly where the position is. Forbid this slipshod practice. The fighting position must be carefully camouflaged. Soldiers should be taught to look at their position as if they were the enemy and planning to attack.

Only the squad leaders should set and recover booby traps, but the men must know their location. Each soldier should set out at least one trip flare or warning device. The platoon must establish a strict SOP on the employment of claymores.

It is essential for each man to know the location of his supplemental position. Platoons should rehearse, a squad at a time, falling back to this position.

As a matter of SOP, each squad should be assigned a nightly artillery concentration, preferably registered. If the tactical situation does not permit this, the squad leader must point out to his men where it is on the ground, and its number. The concentration number should remain the same night after night. If a platoon is hit and a soldier sees a good artillery target, he yells to his squad leader, "25 enemy from concentration A210, left 50, drop 50." The squad leader passes this to his platoon leader who provides an azimuth and calls in the fire. It's simple, and it works like a charm.

Do not stay in one position longer than one night. Keep moving, and you normally will keep the enemy off balance. He is too thorough to attack without knowing all the scoop about you. Remember, he only fights when he knows he can win!

Stress light, noise, and fire discipline; assign top priority to the development of your fire plan, and always fire it in before dark. Conduct stand-to at dusk, dawn, and, occasionally, when keyed to intelligence, during the night. During the dawn stand-to, stay at 100 percent alert until patrols have swept your complete perimeter. The enemy often stages right on top of a unit, with the purpose of attacking after stand-to when the unit is in that vulnerable twilight zone of preparing to move. Maximum security is achieved if the sweeping patrol takes up outguard positions around the perimeter while it is breaking camp.

During daylight hours, patrol out from your perimeter with strong combat patrols. Insure that each patrol is planned, prepared, and executed with precision. Each patrol should register supporting fires and have reliable communications. Inspect each patrol member before departure for weapons maintenance, quality of preparation, knowledge of mission, and unit patrol SOPs. Take time out when the patrol returns to debrief the members as a group and thank them for a "job well done." Then, let them rack out.

Your command post should be well dug in. A six-foot by

two-and-one-half foot hole, chest deep, will suffice; a poncho can be stretched tight over the top to allow for the use of a filtered flashight for map study and message copying. The command post must be a defensive entity. This means that if a portion of your perimeter is overrun, the CP will remain a fortified island that can care for itself. Your CP group must be able to fight in any direction. Radios are operated from the bottom of the hole for maximum protection. The radio is your lifeline. Take care of it.

The perimeter must be checked to insure that a minimum of one man per fighting position is awake and alert. In the jungle, I recommend *against* a leader physically walking the line during darkness. This procedure is too noisy, and jumpy soldiers have killed their fair share of squad and platoon leaders. A system I suggest is that each fighting position be connected with a piece of communication wire. The trooper who is on guard holds the wire in one hand. The wire is tugged every 20 minutes. If a fighting position does not respond to a tug, a leader is notified and he pays the position a visit. Soldiers who sleep on guard must be treated harshly.

The best defense against attack is alert soldiers, trip grenades, trip flares, anti-intrusion devices, and sharp OPs. If your OPs are on the ball and have a starlight scope, they will see and smell the enemy. Instruct your OPs when they see enemy soldiers to spray a few magazines, toss a couple of grenades, and make it back to the line yelling as loud as they can that the platoon's got visitors.

The platoon immediately should go to 100 percent alert and simultaneously hose down all sectors of fire. The artillery defensive fires should immediately be brought in, and a flare ship should turn night into day.

The enemy prefers to attack when there is no moon or during heavy rain. Increase your number of OPs and percentage of people who are on guard during these periods.

So far, we have just discussed the hasty overnight defensive position. On occasion, you will be assigned a security mission, such as for an artillery battery or the attached helicopter company of a higher headquarters.

When you get this kind of mission, you must harden your position, set out wire barriers, mines, booby traps, claymore mines, and improvised flame devices (such as electrically detonated *fougasse*). An open fighting position is not sufficient if you are going to stay in one spot more than a day. You must build bunkers that are designed to last. All positions should have reinforced overhead cover capable of withstanding the effects of mortar fire. Positions must be well camouflaged and have small firing apertures. The outline of the bunker must be broken up by the skillful use of camouflage to prevent silhouetting at night. The bunkers should be at least 50 meters behind the inner barrier wire to be out of hand grenade range and to reduce the damage from enemy employed claymore mines. Place chicken wire over the aperture of each bunker to deflect grenades. Connect each bunker with a deep zigzag pattern trench network. Cut grenade sumps throughout the trenches.

Establish dummy positions to confuse an enemy intelligence team who may be sketching the perimeter. Leave your machineguns in alternate firing positions during daylight. After dark, move them to their primary sites. Do everything possible to break the routine. Do not get into a rut and follow a schedule. The enemy will be watching and studying.

Get out to your front and try to outthink your opponent. Don't just sit and wait to get hit. The best defense is a vigorous offense. Get out and patrol around the hardened base. Set up ambushes and OPs during day and night. Place VT H & I fire on possible enemy mortar positions at night; also stake out ambushes in these positions.

If you do your job right, you can kill a lot of the enemy in a defensive perimeter, whether it's an overnight or hardened position. And that's the *name of the game.*

SWAP SHOP

FIELD EXPEDIENT ACETATE

During field exercises, our unit tries to keep leaders down to squad level better informed by distributing overlays showing the company's mission and the various control measures. These overlays are usually made of a thick film acetate. Because this material is very stiff, though, the overlays are difficult to carry and easily damaged.

During a deployment to Korea, we discovered another problem. Because of the extended time in the field, we ran out of the acetate. Being excellent infantry soldiers, we scrounged around for a similar material that we could use as a substitute.

The answer was the clear plastic trash bags the Army supplies us for handling garbage. We chopped ours up into pieces of the right size, drew on them the information the leaders needed, and distributed them.

A side benefit we discovered was that this plastic is tough and flexible. The leaders can now wad the overlays up and stuff them into their pockets without damaging them. The only things to worry about when using this material are to avoid stretching it out of shape by pulling too hard on it and to keep it away from hot items that could melt it.

(Submitted by Lieutenant Craig D. McKibbin, California Army National Guard, Westminster, California.)